

Report on a Japanese Hospital Ship

This report concerns the Japanese Hospital Ship, Tachibana Maru, designated by the Japanese Government as AH 31, in October, 1943. She is not a large vessel. Her gross weight is 1772 tons with a length of 249 feet and beam of 40 feet. She is powered by diesel engines and has a maximum speed of 16 knots and a normal cruising speed of 14 knots.

The Tachibana Maru was boarded at 0658 on the morning of 3 August, in the Banda Sea north of Timor. The purpose of the boarding was for a routine check on both patients and cargo.

The senior Japanese medical officer escorted the medical inspecting party, which consisted of the author and one hospital corpsman, thru those parts of the ship quartering the patients. The Japanese doctor, an Army Captain, was polite and correct in manner but declined to elaborate on any questions asked, such as specific methods of treatment, or his personal opinion as to the physical condition of the patients. When asked if he had anticipated the death of any patients on the trip, he replied that he had not. All patients lay with eyes closed while the inspecting party was passing thru the wards, no doubt previously instructed to look as sick as possible. No objections were voiced when the inspection party pried into several large boxes marked with the red cross and labeled as medical supplies. These boxes were found to contain thousands of ampoules of vitamin preparations. As the inspection progressed the Japanese medical officer became noticeably nervous and it was with relief that our party climbed out of the holds and up to the relative security of the bridge.

Contraband of war, consisting of arms and ammunition was found by the search party at 0750 and the ship was then taken over by our force and sailed into an Allied port for further investigation.

An excellent opportunity for appraisal of the ship as a Hospital Ship, as well as Japanese medical methods was afforded on the trip in. Fortunately, one of the junior medical officers proved very cooperative and most of the following information was obtained from him.

Facts of General Interest

The junior medical officer came aboard the Tachibana Maru on 17 December, 1944, at Manila. He had previously served three years aboard army troop ships. He stated that since he reported aboard, the Tachibana Maru had made trips between Saigon, Takao, Java, Singapore, Celebes, Sumatra, and other Japanese occupied islands in the Southwest Pacific. At no time had the ship carried more than 700 patients, which was normal maximum capacity. This is an interesting fact because at the time of interception, more than 1550 "patients" were aboard.

When the Tachibana Maru was boarded she was enroute from Toeal, Kai Islands, to Makassar, Celebes, and thence to Soerabaja. The informant stated that to the best of his knowledge the patients aboard had been evacuated by barge and small craft from the Vogelkop Peninsula of New Guinea, and surrounding islands. He said that they had been hospitalized in a large general hospital at Toeal for periods up to six months. The officer also volunteered that only those men in the best physical condition were evacuated on this trip. In so far as he knew, this was the first time a Japanese Hospital Ship had visited the Kai Islands.

Three doctors, all indifferently trained, were aboard the ship, and permanently attached to her. The senior medical officer had spent one year as an interne but had no other training. The junior medical officer also had but one years postgraduate training. The third medical officer had been recently inducted into the Army and was still in apprentice status. A total of 33 medical corpsmen were aboard. Hardly an impressive total to care for over 1550 patients.

Evaluation as a Hospital Ship

While approaching and still several hundred yards away, the stench from the Tachibana Maru was very much in evidence. Urine and feces from cats and monkeys, of which there were numbers aboard, as well as excrement from the patients and crew were noted in the scuppers. There were two large heads on the port side of the ship aft, one on the main deck and one on the first platform deck. Many of the toilets were inoperable and the urinals had no flushing systems. Evidently the heads had not been cleaned for months and their odor was overpowering.

The patients were quartered in three wards, two of them actually being cargo compartments. One was situated on the main deck forward and two were below the main deck, midships and aft. A crude wooden platform had been built in two of the compartments, halfway between the deck and the overhead. Patients were lying on these platforms and on the decks beneath them, in conditions so crowded that they were actually stretched out over each other. A few higher ranking officers were placed in staterooms, three to a room. The officers had mattresses and pillows but the enlisted men had neither. Lighting facilities on the wards were so inadequate that the opposite end of the ward could not be seen without a flashlight.

The ship has no forced ventilation system and the heat below decks was stifling. The ship did not have evaporators. Fresh water was carried in storage tanks and doled out in small amounts for drinking purposes. No water was allowed for bathing or personal hygiene. Samples of water were taken from all tanks after reaching port. None of the water was potable, being heavily contaminated with E. coli. Fortunately, the boarding party had been forewarned and avoided all ships water.

There were no operating rooms on the ship. Neither were there dental treatment units, treatment rooms, x-ray facilities, or isolation wards. There was no laboratory and no diet kitchen.

Care of the Patients

The patients were fed twice daily, at 0800 and at 1600. Japanese medical corpsmen prepared the food and carried it to the wards. The diet consisted exclusively of boiled white rice and dried fish chips. The rice was dumped into large wooden kegs and the fish into smaller buckets and carried to the wards. These containers were passed from patient to patient and each took a double handful of rice and fish which he fashioned into a large ball and ate with his fingers. No vitamin supplements were given, in spite of the fact that many of the patients allegedly suffered from beriberi and malnutrition.

Conditions in the galley were in keeping with the rest of the ship. The only cooking facilities were three large kettles heated with steam from the engine room. Roaches two inches long swarmed over everything and no attempt was made to curb them. Rats nested in the raw rice bins and the monkeys and cats played in them.

All patients were ambulatory and went to the head unassisted. No bedside care was given, although apparently no patients were sick enough to require it.

Tabulation of Diseases

A roster of the patients and a diagnosis for each was aboard. According to the junior medical officer this roster had been compiled while the group was in the hospital at Toeal. The ship's doctors were not familiar with the patients.

The following breakdown according to diseases shows a total of 1538 patients, leaving a few unaccounted for. The junior medical officer with the aid of an interpreter tabulated the cases as follows:

Beriberi-----	550
Malaria-----	400
Malaria and Beriberi-----	212
Tuberculosis, pulmonary-----	60
Pleurisy, chronic-----	59
Infestation, Ascaris-----	34
Bronchitis, chronic-----	32
Enteritis, Chronic-----	16
Neurasthenia-----	11
Ulcer, stomach-----	11
Dengue Fever-----	10
Dysentery, Amoebic-----	5
Catarrh, acute (Coryza)-----	1
Kidney stone-----	4
Icterus-----	8
Malaria and Icterus-----	4
Beriberi and Asthma-----	8
Malaria and Dengue Fever---	5

Contusions, Back-----	4
Lumbago-----	7
Sciatica-----	6
Beriberi and Sciatica-----	4
Malaria and Tropical Ulcer, leg-----	9
Amputation, traumatic, finger-----	1
Beriberi and Kidney stone-----	4
Hemorrhoids-----	4
Malaria and Enteritis, acute-----	12
Prolapse of Rectum-----	7
Appendicitis, chronic-----	8
Ulcer, duodenum-----	4
Eczema, chronic-----	11
Otitis Media-----	3
Beriberi and Tropical Ulcer, leg-----	8
Tuberculosis, pul., and Beriberi-----	1
Beriberi and Gastritis, chronic-----	4

When the ship was docked at an Allied port, all the "patients" were marched off the ship and obediently formed ranks. It is the opinion of this medical officer that these Japanese should be more accurately referred to as troops, for their physical condition did not warrant the term patient.

By our standards the Tachibana Maru resembled a Hospital Ship only in that she was marked as one.

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